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# Book Review: *Reluctant Interveners: America's Failed Responses to Genocide from Bosnia to Darfur*

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*Reluctant Interveners: America's Failed Responses to Genocide from Bosnia to Darfur*

Eyal Mayroz

New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2019

217 Pages; Price: \$34.95 Paperback

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Like so many of us who study genocide, Eyal Mayroz entered this field with a simple but troubling set of questions: "Why has the international community been sitting on its hands while countless children, women, and men were being massacred, often by their own governments? And why do states continue to stand by in the face of mass atrocities even today?"<sup>1</sup>

In answering these questions, Mayroz makes a significant contribution to the study of the United States' relationship with genocide, which is largely under-represented in the field of genocide studies. Though not a primary focus of *Reluctant Interveners*, Mayroz engages with and critiques the previous work of Samantha Power, as well as Kenneth Campbell and Peter Ronayne.<sup>2</sup> As Mayroz appropriately describes it, his book represents an "attempt to move a primarily theoretical debate into the realm of empirically observed political actuality. Applying interpretivist lenses to the tension between the ideal of 'never again' and the reality of 'ever again,' the book captures and describes multifaceted relationships among key actors and factors."<sup>3</sup>

Actors discussed include U.S. administrations, the media and, the public. Factors include, among others, political leadership; political and media communication; and public opinion and behavior. In addressing the influences of these actors and the interconnectedness of these factors, Mayroz methodically analyzes troves of primary sources and integrates the works of key scholars in the fields of political communication and media studies on American foreign policy, such as Murray Edelman and Robert Entman.<sup>4</sup>

Building off the works of others, especially Entman's Cascading Network Activation model, Mayroz devises a model for his analysis that is specific to crisis situations like genocide. Central to Mayroz's model are the downward flow of information from the presidential administration, through the media, and to the public, and the upward flow (feedback) of information from the public to the administration that also largely occurs through the media. In this model, the downward flow represents the primary flow as political elites seek to understand and, in some cases, "manage" the public. Put differently, Mayroz uses his model to assess how administrations have interpreted the public sentiment and whether administrations have misread the level of public support for U.S. leadership on genocide, or perhaps even sought to steer the public away from support for a more robust response.

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<sup>1</sup> Eyal Mayroz, *Reluctant Interveners: America's Failed Responses to Genocide from Bosnia to Darfur* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), ix.

<sup>2</sup> See Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003); Kenneth J. Campbell, *Genocide and the Global Village* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Peter Ronayne, *Never Again? The United States and the Prevention of Genocide since the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). For different approaches to the study of the U.S. relationship with genocide, see also Jeffrey S. Bachman, *The United States and Genocide: (Re)Defining the Relationship* (London: Routledge, 2017) and contributions to Adam Jones (ed.), *Genocide, War Crimes and the West* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Mayroz, *Reluctant Interveners*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

What separates Mayroz's research from similar attempts to evaluate the role of presidential leadership in how the U.S. responds to genocide is the methodical and comprehensive nature of his study. For example, Mayroz rightly points out that Power cited selected speeches from which she concludes that presidential rhetoric was "strong" on responding to genocide. However, according to Mayroz's findings that are based on the analysis of an incredible number of speeches and statements, "no American president has ever fully committed the United States to the project of confronting genocide."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Mayroz writes,

"Such a commitment would have contradicted a core principle of American foreign policy: retaining the freedom to choose actions case by case, based on dynamic circumstances and potentially changing interests."<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, Mayroz's findings are significant in how they challenge the prevailing notion that what is needed from U.S. leadership is more effort to align words, which have been forthcoming, and deeds, which have been lacking. Indeed, *Reluctant Interveners* has been described by others as "sobering," which aptly describes the following conclusion by Mayroz: "In the rare occasions when presidents did invoke the label [genocide], their rhetoric was moralizing but mostly devoid of meaningful commitments."<sup>7</sup>

In his study of Rwanda and Bosnia, Mayroz makes an important distinction between public opinion and public behavior. In a sense, Mayroz recognizes their interconnectedness, while also demonstrating the ways in which seeming disconnects between the two may be perceived, interpreted, or even exploited by an administration. For example, in the case of Rwanda, Mayroz illustrates how the Clinton administration may have chosen to weigh behavioral indicators more than expressed public opinion to conclude that "the political costs of inaction could be managed."<sup>8</sup> In other words, public behavior did nothing to fortify or operationalize public opinion.

In the case of Darfur, Mayroz highlights the depth of complexity in determinations about how to respond to suspected cases of genocide. Multiple actors and factors collided, resulting in limited action by the United States. As Mayroz explains, the Bush administration labeled what was happening in Darfur as genocide in 2004 and was active at the UNSC. Yet, domestic and international politics did not converge for the purposes of a robust response. Domestically, public attitudes indicated support for U.S. leadership on Darfur. This was accompanied by the Save Darfur Coalition, which Mayroz describes as "the most significant anti-genocide pressure group in American history."<sup>9</sup> However, internationally, a more robust response would have required convincing fellow UNSC members Russia and China to go against their strategic interests.

Mayroz concludes that this dichotomous relationship between the domestic and the international likely permitted the Bush administration to act without acting sufficiently. As Mayroz notes,

"Driven by domestic pressures, the genocide determination did increase the salience of the crisis. But even such a proclamation by the world's foremost superpower could not make a meaningful impact on international political will. Not only that, but in an unfortunate twist of fate it helped to legitimate domestically a reticent US policy and made it easier for the Bush administration to evade riskier and costlier policy options."<sup>10</sup>

Coming in at a concise 134 pages of primary text, *Reluctant Interveners* is tightly filled with significant research and findings, of which the above only represents a small sample. Ultimately, Mayroz offers his readers an informative and critical account of America's relationship with

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<sup>5</sup> Mayroz, *Reluctant Interveners*, 56.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

genocide, from the role of the presidency to that of the public. In doing so, Mayroz also contributes to bridging the gap between academic scholarship and policy by providing his readers with something of a playbook. Mayroz maps the various levels of action from, as well as interactions between, administrations, the media, and the public. Thus, key lessons can be learned from *Reluctant Interveners* about how administrations, along with an all too often compliant U.S. media on foreign policy, attempts to manage public opinion and behavior in order to elicit support for the administration's preferred policy response to suspected cases of genocide.

With this knowledge, citizens and civil society can implement better informed strategies in their advocacy work. Relatedly, Mayroz "calls for those who live in countries with better human rights protections to share a more proactive moral commitment to helping those who are less fortunate, even at certain costs."<sup>11</sup> This makes Mayroz's book, with its significant contributions to the multiple intersecting literatures of genocide studies, political communication and public opinion, and American foreign policy, essential reading for scholars, students, activists, civil society actors, elected officials, and members of nongovernmental and intergovernmental institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.